
UNIT 1 DALIT BELIEF SYSTEMS AND RITUALS

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this Unit is to give a brief but comprehensive understanding of the complex reality of the belief systems and rituals of the Dalit religio-cultural world. It presents some initial glimpses into the world-views operative behind the cognitive axis (belief systems) and performative axis (ritual practices) in the Dalit world of religiosity, without claiming to be an exhaustive portrayal of the details. Further, it attempts at dwelling on the ways in which the 'Dalits' encounter their 'sacred' places, persons, and objects in the process of seeking to undo the negativities and experiences and reinforce the dreams of a new world better than that of the present one. By the end of this Unit one could be expected to acquire understanding in the following manner:

- To obtain a basic understanding of Dalits' religious world amidst conflicts
 - To have some glimpses into their systems of belief
 - To take stock of the Dalit images of the divine
 - To journey with them with the memory of the order of orality
 - To know the significance of sacrifices and rituals for communicating with the divine
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1.1 INTRODUCTION

Dalit journey towards their new identities are often expressed through idioms of revolt against the domination and subordination. This expression marked by struggle and resistance pervades all dimensions of Dalit existence, including their religiosity. In order to break the hegemonic exclusion and degradation imposed on them, the Dalits evolve strategies to organize themselves. At a moment of history, they may appear to embrace the belief systems and rituals of the dominant. Nevertheless, at another moment of history, they might set aside the same. Interestingly, the Dalit ways of opting for temporary or permanent inclusion or exclusion of the Great Traditions have the ultimate agenda of building a larger human community with a sense of egalitarianism. This is how Dalits tend to handle their own symbolic world with the spirit of an upsurge of self-assertion as against the elitist expectation of uncritical assimilation of their casteist values.

1.2 RELIGIOUS WORLD AMIDST CONFLICTS

The Dalit agenda for integral liberation does not merely attempt at mobilization for acquisition of resources and power. Along with the above, it predominantly addresses the question of basic identity as dignified co-humans with others both as individuals and a people. And hence, any Dalit discourse, mild or articulate, in the last analysis, seeks to project an inclusive ideology. In their on-going struggle for annihilating caste-system and gaining their human dignity, the Dalits are relentlessly optimistic in building a new human family in which there will be no trace of any discriminatory hierarchical consciousness.

With regard to the expression of self-identity and self-assertion of the Dalits, one cannot expect uniformity. The religio-cultural sensibilities of Dalits are not a package but a process of an acquired and constructed system of collective self-representation. They are communicated by means of multivalent symbols held together in a loosely organised pattern, which have emotional, ethical, communicative and resistive dimensions of the Dalits with other humans and the deities.

At the symbolic level, there is a wide spectrum of Dalit responses to their oppression with the process of Sanskritisation on one extreme and of an outright de-Hinduisation on the other. At the secular level, the great personality of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar seems to have captured the collective Dalit imagination as their liberative symbol especially in the recent past. And further, the native cultural expressions of Dalits like *Parayattam* (dance with drums), which has been associated only with funeral and hence dismissed as inauspicious by the elite in the casteist society, is now acclaimed by Dalits as the enthusing mode of celebration of life during their gatherings or festivals.

1.3 BELIEF SYSTEMS OF DALIT WORLD

The context which creates the consciousness is the socio-cultural location. It creates the meaning-generating symbolic world. Dalit location is a complex hybrid of intertextual worlds. They are comprised of textures interwoven with traditions oral, written, celluloid, and electronic. One could have some glimpses into them through the patterns of their spontaneous stories, linguistic expressions, body-language, ritual practices and aesthetic options. Their inner world, as a 'unified mix-up', is constantly in the making with multiple processes of interactions between identities imposed from outside and emerging from within. The constant interplay between intra-subjective and inter-subjective aspects of their life and between the explicit and implicit dimensions of their conflicting consciousness makes the interpretation of the Dalit religious expressions all the more a challenging task.

Before grappling with practices of belief systems and rituals of the Dalits, their experience of marginalization and assertion are presented as follows:

- segregation of the living locations and burial grounds
- step motherly treatment meted out to them regarding their dignified participation in public events, social activities, community worship, or governing institutions
- denial of equal rights in marriage or burial ceremonies and car procession of festivals

- indifference and even opposition towards promotion of vocations to dignified services at the civil level and sacred premises of the worshipping places
- continuing the tradition of endogamy perpetuating the caste systems

By and large, these regular patterns of elbowing out Dalits from the mainline society is taken for granted as the habitual cultural praxis by the caste-minded people with their socio-economic powers operative in their respective locations.

1.4 PROBLEM OF EVIL: DALIT PERSPECTIVE

As the victims of the shameful practice of untouchability, the Dalits are subjected to lots of suffering as indicated below.

- The damage of human dignity with arbitrary attribution of permanent pollution as untouchables due to the practice of caste hierarchy.
- The contradiction between being wanted as menial executives and unwanted as people with equal footing.
- The inner conflicts between the personal desire for equal placement with others and the impersonal duty of being reduced to be lesser humans in the socio-political ladders.
- Conflicting expressions of the explicit consciousness (immediate agenda of survival) and the implicit consciousness (sustaining passion for collective human identity).
- When the achieved status is ridiculed and camouflaged by attributed inferior status.
- When multiple forms of day-to-day socio-psychological and politico-physiological violence are trivialized by routinization, naturalization or even legitimization by the media, bureaucracy or judiciary.
- The vicious cycle of behaviour due to depression or self-hatred resulting in fear of alienation and punishment.
- Ever carrying the heavy burden of initiating the painful process of reconciliation, at least for the short-term political alliances, with the anti-Dalit forces which are just above in the social pyramid of caste hierarchy.
- When Dalit ethical sensibilities are thrown overboard as eccentric claims for any regional, national or international discourse.

While scanning through all these sources, we realize that these sufferings are not inflicted by the Dalits upon themselves. And hence the classical ways of approaching the problem of evil (suffering) cannot be adequate while dealing with Dalit suffering.

1.5 PRAGMATIC AND CONSTRUCTIVE RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

Religious energies possess the capacity to function as a counter-symbolic factory whereby subaltern communities like Dalits reject the hegemonic symbolic universe of the dominant caste communities and construct one of their own. The act of constructing their own symbolic worldview in the face of severe domination becomes the basis of hope, not just for their resistance but, more importantly, for the working out of their own assertive power.

In response to the tyranny of the systematic and effective marginalization by the sacred tradition of the elite in the caste system, the Dalits create their pragmatic and constructive counter-symbols, in order to uphold the values of protection of life, production for livelihood and

procreation of new life. These aspects of protection (drum, goddesses protecting the boundaries), production (the *Mulaippari*, *Pongal*, plough – as in Tamil Dalit tradition) and procreation (rituals related to puberty, child-birth, post-natal ceremonies) are passionately attended to even by the most wretched at least in a small scale in simple forms.

These primordial symbols signifying protection, production and procreation are still embedded in the substratum of Dalit consciousness irrespective of the osmosis of cultural elements shared with the dominant. For instance, in the realm of Dalit symbolic world “the drum” symbolizes the mediating and empowering presence of the divine. In spite of the process of denigration, defamation and vilification of the Dalit drum by the non-Dalits down the centuries, the very drum seems to be the foundational symbol of sustenance, nurture and empowerment of the Dalits. And the audible nature of the music of the drum is capable of piercing through the borderline of purity-pollution. While the caste elite could control the aspects of touch and sight by reducing the Dalits as untouchable and ‘unseeable,’ the audibility of the drum-beat cannot be controlled by them. And it is this audibility of the drumbeaters, that poses the challenge to those who live by *Sruti* (what is heard). Being deprived even of the possibility of hearing these sacred traditions being recited, the Dalits do create their own *Sruti* through their drum beat and continue to cheerfully dance to its tune even during the funeral processions.

Contemplative stillness and interior composure constitute the dominant knowledge system based on literacy, transcendentalism, other worldly powers, one-way traffic of the grace, revelation, *sabda pramana* etc. These may not be the mainline categories in Dalit celebration of life. Rather differential and disadvantaged historical memories of the collective Dalit consciousness will be the platform upon which their mythologies are constructed. What matters here, then, is insight rather than instruction, bodily site than ideational site, action than reflection.

Word-based concepts, texts or discourses may not occupy the matrix of Dalit festivities in which inter-subjective communication of meaning occurs. It occurs through the ‘performative language’ originated from the roots of ‘the whole being’ of the Dalits involving the personal autonomy, self-definition, and power operative in a full swing especially during the luminal elevation. Discursive aspects of language may not fit in here.

The particularity and elasticity of oral culture along with the native ritual components allows them to present themselves through maximum use of the available space (geographical, political or social) with energetic kinaesthetic gestures upon the bodily site during the festivals. In other words, it is the power discourse seeking to publicize the hidden or suppressed conflicts between the activated ‘popular authority’ and the existing traditional authority. It is done consciously or unconsciously by creating disorderliness vociferously manifest (through the power of ‘voice’) in view of self-empowerment. And Dalit festivities are predominantly oppositional in their expressions, and pro-active in promoting equality.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

- 1) How do we understand the ‘Conflicting Consciousness’ of the Dalits?

2) Explain the relationship between the Dalit cultural context and their religiosity.

1.6 RELIGIOUS WORLD IN DAILY LIFE

Dalit worship is at once iconic as well as 'a-iconic.' Though originally 'a-iconic,' they incorporated the iconic ethos into their cult, because of close proximity with the caste society coloured by the brahminic temple-centred outlook. That is why the depiction of the gods and goddesses in the worship places solely owned by the Dalit communities could be the unseasoned raw stones with no roof upon them or the well-made sculptures made out of mud or other cheap materials. The metallic icons with their exorbitant costs-productive and maintenance- may not suit to the slender budgets of the Dalit communities. The pouring out of costly materials like milk, honey, fruit-mixture (*panchamirtham* - Tamil) is not the standard practice prevalent among the Dalits

The decorations of the deities, both within the make-shift mini temples or in the car (*ther* – Tamil) are, by and large, of the natural (leaves and flowers) and inexpensive materials (plastic pieces or paper bits). Dazzling colours for these materials are preferably chosen for arresting the attention of the eyes.

By and large, the Dalit festivals are marked with noisy atmosphere. The movements of the divine cannot be dissociated from animated boisterous blare of noise. The absolute erupts into the universe as a roaring noise and the drumming rhythm rending the air with thunderous clamour. The legitimate pride and the hidden shame as well latently operative so far in the unconscious become ferociously revealed during such luminal experiences, obviously through the medium of human body. It is, as it were, the harmonious rhythm of the whole universe has been thrown out of gear on the verge of becoming an irretrievable disorder. It could be an amalgam of uncontrollable emotions like astonishment, disorientation, fright and inevitably desire too.

The duality experienced due to imposed social stigma (social death Vs human dignity) is sought to be resolved through the roars of such divine cries. On the plane of the religious rituals there may be an ambiguity whether they might emerge victorious or not. But these assertive cries of the divine roar become the soteriological vehicle insofar as they enable the eruption of the hope of a new life of equality as the dignified co-human with others.

Prophetic oracles construed as the enunciation of God's will through the medium of possessed humans is a celebrated aspect of Dalit religio-cultural world. Such oracles (*kuri sollurathu* or *saamiaattam*) are actively found for authoritatively addressing the situation of personal deprivation or societal need. Prophetic defiance of the imposed order of the rulers is the

endearing theme attuned to the Dalit culture of disobedience to caste norms. When the elite, be it from within or outside of the Jewish world, is admonished in the prophetic texts for the excesses committed against the disempowered, the Dalit self-assertion is reinvigorated. When oracles of consolations are addressed they regain their composure in order to encounter the inimical world with confidence and courage.

Dalit religiosity has to be traced to their folk religious practices. Their religions are naturalistic, spontaneously materialistic and they are non-institutionalised. They are the symbolic treasure houses of the sufferings and joys of those people. They are the wailing walls of the people as well as the gorilla-war pits of the people. They are the local utopias of the people.

When Dalits encounter the apocalyptic narratives of direct divine intervention of God to protect the good and punish the evil, they are quite much enthused to vibrate with them. The only way-out for the hapless disempowered from the multiple forms of repression by the ruling elite is through the apocalyptic irruption. Abounding in rich symbolism, the wounded psyche of the victims seek to subvert or reject the existing order imposed on them while continuing to project and dream an alternative order in its place. The mega colonial or caste powers would be opposed by the powerless even within the limited political space. In other words, the apocalyptic visions are the weapons of the weak against the dominant forces.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) What are the differences between the religious world of Dalits and the dominant classical traditions?

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2) Spell out the relationship between Dalit powers and religious symbols.

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1.7 IMAGING THE DIVINE

The native Dalit religiosity, by and large, revolves around the down-to-earth deities. They could be broadly classified under the categories following categories: Mother Goddesses, Memory Stones for the Martyred leaders, Memory of the Dead among the Kinsfolk.

The leisurely class of people alienated from the culture of daily manual work tend to construct their religious culture with the heavenly myths as the epicentre. The nomadic people may not have the agrarian sensibilities as part of their religious universe. But the Dalits, by and large, though reduced to be landless migrants, are closely attuned to the religio-cultural sensibilities of

the agrarian culture. Their experience of divinity could be characterized as the agrarian pluralism of deities from the anthropological roots. These deities emerge from the humans as a continuum. When immanent here-and-now is the hall-mark of Dalit deities, the transcendental otherness is the overriding trait of those who are not in direct touch with manual labour. The agricultural symbolism (the Earth-related world) marks Dalit worship; whereas the desert symbolism (the Heaven-related world) marks the worship of other people.

In the Dalit world, the mother goddesses play a vital and indispensable role in their battered human consciousness. But on the other hand, the feminine face of God in the organised religions practised by the caste-minded elite is either subjugated to the male gods or regrettably relegated. Even those organised religions celebrating the symbols of fertility and mother goddesses tend to undermine such symbols with the superiority of the male gods. The autonomy of the female goddesses free from the grip of the control of the male gods could be one of the major items in the Dalit religio-cultural world.

The image of the deity as belonging to the family (*kula dheivam*) or an ethnic group of people (*namma saami*) evokes positive response from Dalits. They are at home with the image of the Protector-God (*kaaval deivam*) and Powerful God with expression of wrath (*kaliyamman*). The god of mobility (temporary icon under the tree) is more endearing to them than the god of stability (permanent icon within Temple). While the former represents the on-going solidarity of the deity as living with them, the latter evokes in them the sense of alienation from such a deity already domesticated by the caste ideology.

Being attuned to down-to-earth spirituality built upon material concreteness of here and now, Dalits are at home with the anthropomorphism of God. This understanding is rather closely vibrant with divine-human continuum of the Dalit experience of God. Monotheistic import of the organised religions across the globe and especially of distant and transcendental of God may not be the essential component or the epicentre of the Dalit religious world. At the same time, Dalit world is not against the One and the Only Righteous God to arbitrate immediate justice to the last and the least of the humanity thrown to the periphery. There is a sense of repulsion with regard to stipulations related to purity and pollution of some of the religious traditions. There is an element of Dalit aversion towards elaborate ritual prescriptions for individual and collective worship. Long narratives with minute details and stories with dramatic turns of events attract the Dalit listener/ reader more effectively than the prolonged discourses with monotonous formulaic enumeration of codes or sayings.

The stories of promise-and-fulfilment in the discourses between the devotees and deities strike a concordant note with their perennial act of hopeful expectation of a promising future. When the religious stories portray the fulfillment of the humanly impossible things in the far or near future by God's direct or indirect intervention, the hope-generating mechanism within the Dalit psyche and their collective consciousness is revived with new enthusiasm. The fulfillment quotations, nostalgic reminiscences of the past victory or the painful memory of any defeat or triumph in any religio-cultural stories create a sense of solidarity when the Dalits encounter them. As a people deprived of land ownership, Dalits actively vibrate with the themes and religious narratives related to the acquisition of land. The figurative language of prophetic poets and the parabolic and anecdotal modes of religious stories forcefully rivet their attention. That is why, many stories

eyed through the lens of the Dalits come out with new perspectives different from the traditional ones.

1.8 ACCESS THROUGH MEMORY, SACRIFICES AND RITUALS

Many of the Dalits who had been murdered while protecting the village or for defying imposed casteist norms have been eventually deified (*kolayil udita deivangal*). They are represented through the symbols of formless stones, sandy mounds, tree or metal spear or statues. Such symbols are made of easily available materials mud, limestone, mortar, cement etc. By and large, these statues holding the rustic weapons are portrayed with the energetic postures and brisk expressions of wrath. Tranquil postures in deep contemplation or slumber are not part of the mainstream deities of Dalits.

The respect paid to the dead is quite profound in the Dalit world. The food consumed or the materials used by the dead ones are specially offered to the dead ones on their graveyard. Interestingly each event of remembering the dead is marked with the collective meal in memory of them. Memory and meal are the inseparables from the Dalit world. The aspect of collectively shared meal is the hallmark of the practices of animal sacrifice. The communitarian meal in memory of the dead who was killed as the martyr for having had the fellowship meal with the so-called polluted ones is also in tune with the Dalit sensibility.

The following are some of the notable features in the worship patterns of the Dalits: offering of the replica symbols (of the members of the body) made of some costly or cheap metals tonsuring of the head, moving towards the sacred spots on knees, walking with burning candles or oil lamps in deep devotion, offer of coconut sapling, sacrificing goats whose thigh portion is offered to the deity or priests, and other portions for feeding a large number of people, offer of brooms for acquiring protection from the onslaught of epidemics, carrying bow shaped burden on the shoulders (*kavadi*), carrying milk containers on the head (*palkudam*), piercing of the tongue with sharp lance (*alagu*), pulling the sacred cart by hooks pierced into the skin of pilgrims (*padukalam*), the walking pilgrimage undertaken on sacred months (*padayatra*), and carrying on the head the small baggage of materials required for the rituals at the shrine.

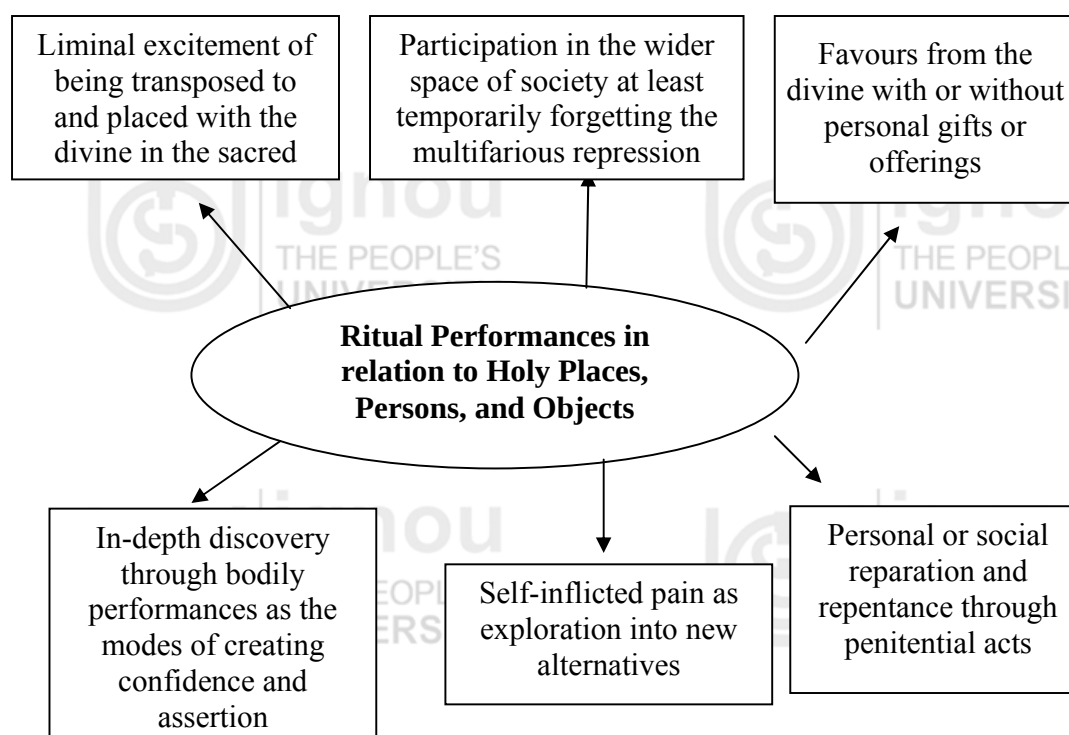
Dalit world counts the animal sacrifice to their gods as religiously significant. In the sacrificial context, the blood itself is a symbol of fertility and multiplication that the people anticipate and cherish in their life. The sacrificial blood mediates the people with their deities. It is a covenant and a performed agreement between the people and the deities. By performing a sacrifice, the people compel the deities to pledge welfare for them. The functions of sacrificial blood are multifarious as contracting covenant, atonement, expiation, reconciliation between parties involved. Both in the worlds of Dalits and the Bible, the body of the sacrificial victim divested of its blood are shared as a communitarian meal. Though burnt offerings were accepted by the Israelites as well as elite Brahminic prescriptions (*yajna* in which animals, cereals, ghee or sarees are sacrificed in fire), they are rejected by Dalits as the unproductive desecration and unpardonable wastage.

The expectations from, perceptions on and interior movements during the pilgrimages of the Dalits to the shrines are quite complex with the constant interplay of multiple variables seem to be the admixture of the following aspects as indicated below:

- endearment to the divine
- persuading the divine for certain favours
- act of fulfilment of the promise made to the divine
- fear of possible divine wrath for not fulfilling the same promise
- addiction to tradition
- participation in a social event
- thrill of undertaking a spiritual journey
- joining the world of people at large away from the local situation of oppression
- escape into a different world which creates a temporary anonymity for hiding the existing situation of anguish
- outlet for bent up, unresolved and accumulated emotional baggage
- substitute to fill in the inner vacuum created by imposed humiliation or disappointment
- acquisition of a sense of equality with other pilgrims irrespective of their case or status
- new status symbol by aping the spiritual practices of the dominant caste
- assertion in terms of following their own religious practices different from or independent of those religious practices of the dominant
- weapon for instilling fear of their own divine in the minds of the oppressors
- expressive ways of tackling imposed inferiority or low self-image through the means of rigorous penance or easy-going practices
- scrupulous moralistic outlook
- reprioritising ethical choices
- stepping up the dignity of the self and family
- disciplining oneself from drinking, smoking, or extra marital affairs
- breaking the code of conduct expected of the pilgrims either deliberately or inadvertently
- entertainment with an all-out abandon with individual inebriation or community celebration with overeating and drinking
- excessive bodily expressions with colourful costumes, high decibels with noisy duels with emotional outbursts
- punishing both the body and the inner world
- deterrent to evil tendencies and sins
- prevention of committing a pattern of sins
- purification and exploration
- exemplary acts for the edification of others
- corrective measure towards rehabilitation
- restoration back to mainstream of society

Shrines and pilgrimages evoke the inner world of imagination of the Dalits as sites of religious aesthetics. Mere propositions on aesthetic objects or acts especially in the religious realm do not evoke active and activated response especially from them. But performances in the body evoke a lot in terms of chain of further acts. For the body or mind to be in a position of eliciting an effect, power, or capability from any other sources (venerable object, sacred place, holy person), it must manifest itself in a particular concrete way, which then becomes the triggering point or moment.

This can only be done through the appropriate aesthetic performance. It is not what the object 'says' or 'expresses' by itself is the key issue here. But what it does and what forms of action and social relations the object elicits is significant here. And hence from the point of view of aesthetic fulfilment in the religious realm, we could identify some of the internal factors which seem to determine the various levels of contentment among the Dalits. They are indicated in the illustration below:



The above aspects, though not exhaustive, seem to be at play when the Dalits perform their rituals in relation to the holy places, persons, and objects. One cannot lose sight of the vital aspect of the interior processing of the negativities and deprivations experienced in their day-to-day life in the religio-cultural representations. Simultaneously the dreams and visions of the new possibilities of life better than the existing one are also part of their prayers, articulate and inarticulate, addressed to their deities in the course of such ritual practices.

Through all these religio-cultural cognition and performance, Dalits are struggling to do away with the existing sad states of affairs in constructing a new world order ensuring personal dignity to be celebrated with all other humans as sisters and brothers.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) Comment on Dalit images of the divine.

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2) What are the affective and emotive aspects of Dalit rituals?

1.9 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have tried to offer some glimpses into the world of Dalit belief system and rituals. Dalit journey towards their new identities are often expressed through idioms of revolt against the domination and subordination. This expression marked by struggle and resistance pervades all dimensions of Dalit existence, including their religiosity. When the minority but dominant elite pontificate themselves as associated with the holy living cow, the Dalits are indiscriminately associated with the dead polluting cow. The awareness about the 'contradictory consciousness' of the Dalits alerts us to be rather less enthusiastic in conceptually understanding reality as the infra-structure (economy and power) above which the superstructure (culture and religion) is built. In spite of the fact that the religion could be also the ideological construct hiding the exploitative nature of the structures, the dimension of the agency of the Dalits in the realm of religion-making cannot be ignored.

1.10 KEY WORDS

Conflict consciousness: an implicit and dormant dalit consciousness that unites them with other co-dalits in the practical transformation of the real world.

Dalit religiosity: the act of constructing their own symbolic world-view on the basis of hope.

Affective dimensions of dalit rituals: Luminal excitement of being transposed to & placed with the divine in the sacred, in-depth discovery through bodily performances as the modes of creating confidence and assertion.

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UNIT 2 ESCHATOLOGICAL VIEWS OF THE DALITS

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit explores into the religious understanding of the Dalits regarding the end of human life and the belief in the ancestors and life after death.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Eschatology is that branch of philosophy or theology which deals with metaphysics. It is about that stuff which comes after physical entities. This means that it deals not with physical stuff but with non-physical or spiritual stuff. It can be understood as after physical substance or beyond physical substance. Hence the branch of eschatology has its logic and meaning only in the acceptance of the spiritual matters that is understood as life or reality existing after the death of the physical entity.

2.2 ESCHATOLOGY: NOTIONAL CLARIFICATION

Eschatology is derived from the Greek word, *eschatos/eschate/eschaton* meaning “last” and ‘logy’ meaning “the study of”. This is first used in English around 1550. It is part of theology, philosophy and futurology. It is concerned with what are believed to be the final events in history, the ultimate destiny of humanity. It is concerned with the four last things: death, judgement, heaven, and hell. In mystical phraseology it refers metaphorically to the end of ordinary reality and reunion with the Divine. In the common parlance and understanding, transition from one age to another is often the subject of eschatological discussion. So, instead of “the end of the world” we may speak of “the end of the age” and be referring to the end of “life as we know it” and the beginning of a new reality. Indeed, most apocalyptic literature do not deal with the “end of time” but rather with the end of a certain period of time, the end of life as it is now, and the beginning of a new period of time. It is usually a crisis that brings an end to current reality and ushers in a new way of living / thinking / being. This crisis may take the form of the

intervention of a deity in history, a war, a change in the environment or the reaching of a new level of consciousness. If a better world results, we say it is "utopian". If a worse, it is "dystopian." Eschatologies vary as to their degree of optimism or pessimism about the future (indeed, the same future may be utopian for some and dystopic for others - "heaven and hell" for example). Most modern eschatology and apocalypticism, both religious and secular, involves the violent disruption or destruction of the world, whereas Christian and Jewish eschatologies view the end times as the consummation or perfection of God's creation of the world. For example, according to ancient Hebrew belief, life takes a linear (and not cyclical) path; the world began with God and is constantly headed toward God's final goal for creation.

2.3 BASIS FOR DALIT ESCHATOLOGY

Egalitarian community

Dalits are those people who have been differentiated and discriminated by the caste system which, was introduced by the Aryans who invaded India in the third millennium BC. When the Aryans invaded India, they did not come as *tabularasa*, i.e. without any religious and philosophical background. They came with their own religious system and philosophical purports which were squarely opposed to the philosophical thoughts of the people who were originally living in the sub-continent. The belief system which originated in the land among its people was basically egalitarian, communitarian and this worldly which also reflected their lifestyle. The people who came to occupy the land found that theirs was very different from that of the original thought pattern here. As a result, the invaders tried to impose their religious faith and social system upon the people and divide the society into high and low so as to profit by that social system. This meant the enslavement of the local people for the menial works for the invaders. The otherwise egalitarian local communities who opposed the invaders' faith and belief system are the people who are today called the Dalits. They never accepted their religion, their philosophy and their social arrangement. Though most of the philosophical thoughts that the original people of the land owned were destroyed purposely by the Aryan colonizers, there are evidence of those philosophical treatises in some form or other very scantily and sparsely. The people who owned that philosophical system and opposed the other system to come into their life are the Dalits who have been co-opted into many religious, philosophical orientations today.

This-worldly Assertion

Dalit eschatology is the combination and even the summation of many philosophical and theological renderings which came into existence at different times as a revolt to brahminic and late on hindu philosophical and religious teachings about life after death, spirituality, prayer and many other social teachings in the name of religion and philosophy. Of the system that was prevailing among the local people who lived in this country before the Aryan colonization, Carvaka philosophy is said to be the most ancient school of thought. Certain Brihaspati is said to be the author of Carvaka philosophy. According to Carvaka Philosophy, "there is no God, no heaven, no hell; there is no such thing called atman. One does not and cannot perceive the atman, and one cannot establish its existence with help of inference, because inference is not a valid source of knowledge.

Matter is real

The Carvakas state that consciousness is not due to the atman. When a man/woman dies, his/her consciousness goes away and one cannot prove that it vanishes and exists somewhere else. Being conscious is a peculiar quality of the living human body. It can keep back the consciousness so long as the physical parts are healthy and stay together in a certain form. Consciousness thus is an emergent quality of the physical parts coming together in specific proportions. For example, when yeast is blended with certain juices, they turn into wine. Therefore according to Carvaka metaphysics, life also is only a new configuration of matter. Nothing but matter is real. Therefore, the atman or self-awareness is only the physical body with a new emerging quality.

There is no spirit

The Carvaka metaphysics speak of the mind (*manas*), which is different from the atman. But the Carvakas appear to think of mind as the consciousness in its knowing function, which of course is not separate from the body. The body together with its consciousness is the atman and consciousness in its experiencing function is the mind. Mind knows the external world through the senses. According to the Carvaka metaphysics, it does not consist of five elements. Earth, water, fire, air, and ether are the usual five elements corresponding to the qualities smell, taste, colour, touch and sound, and also corresponding to the five sense organs, nose, tongue, eye, touch and ear. Excepting ether, the first four elements are perceivable elements that are perceivable are real; elements that are inferable are not real according to Carvakas as inference is not a valid source of knowledge. Hence the Carvakas deny the reality of ether. The other four elements make up the world. They consist of tiny particles. The particles accepted by the Carvakas are visible particles; they could not accept the reality of anything that could not be comprehended with the senses.

There is no external cause

Carvaka metaphysics are of the faith that there is no external cause for the four elements coming together and obtaining the qualities of life and consciousness. It is their inherent quality to come together and to have those qualities. However, one cannot generalize on this process and establish a law that, whenever these four elements come together in certain ratio, life and consciousness will emerge. The elements may alter their nature anytime. One cannot, therefore, say that Nature comprises some eternal laws. Every event is a probability, and if it develops into something, then it develops according to its own peculiar nature.

Indian Materialism

Though Indian Materialism is as old as the Vedas, or even earlier to Vedas, they became very prominent and pronounced during the time of the Vedas as the Vedic philosophy came as a blow to the life and beliefs of the people. The first thing is that the Vedic gods were thirsty after power, prominence, food, money and everything that the world craves for. And secondly, they had innumerable gods and goddesses for whom the Vedic priests were doing oblations throughout the year and demanded food, money, drinks, and other material goods which ultimately went into the bellies of the priests. For example, Rig Vedic gods were treated like human beings and bribed with good food and drinks, through sacrificial oblations. That is where the Materialists, also known as sceptics who asked, which gods should we propitiate with oblations? (*kasmai devaya havisha vidhema?*), implying thereby there are innumerable gods that they cause confusion.

Another dimension of the fury of the people was that the Vedic priests started bantering mantras and slogans which nobody understood, sometime even the priests themselves who recite them as we see even today. Hence the recitation of *mantras* to Vedic gods was compared to croaking of frogs in *Manduka sukta*. As a result, the Lokayatas were accused of jugglery of words (*vitandavada*), and not highly respected because they challenged the authority of Vedas and connected rituals. In fact, Charvak though a sage, is referred to as a demon. Thus, those who denied the authority of the Vedas were dubbed as "heretics". Others who took the view that nothing really existed except thought and that reality was only a void were described as "Nihilists".

Naturalism

As happened in ancient Greece, so in India also the human intellect tried to probe and understand nature. It gave birth to philosophy. Since the attempt was to understand and explain natural phenomena, philosophical thought was materialism. So philosophy in India started as materialism. It was called *Swabhava vada* (naturalism). The Vedas and early *Upanishads* refer to *Swabhava vada* and its concepts. The latter rejected the Gods of natural religion and the dominance of the priests, which were the products of the Vedas. For them, perception could be the sole source of knowledge. It must be, however, clarified that the references to *Swabhava vada* and its doctrines censured the Vedas, and the early *Upanishads* were made only for the purpose of refuting them. It is ironical that while refutations are available, the doctrines which were refuted have disappeared. The cause for such disappearance can be easily deducted.

2.4 MATERIALIST FEATURES OF DALIT ESCHATOLOGY

Today one can argue that there cannot be, strictly speaking, dalit eschatology since there is nothing called Dalit religion or also argue that Dalits are spread out into all religions like Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism and many more. What we need to derive as Dalit eschatology is the original revolt against the philosophical and theological systems that were imposed upon them. From this background, today Hinduism, Christianity, Islam can be classified as anti-Dalit and their eschatology is against the nature of Dalit eschatology. On the other hand, what system (Materialism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism) opposed the onslaught of Dalit way of life and world view can be classified as the essence of Dalit Eschatology. From that point of view, we need to see the important purports of these schools and their understanding on eschatology. It is a system of philosophy that considers only facts established by the nature of the matter. It believes in the physical world. It attaches prime importance to the individual and his comforts. It denies existence of god and supernaturalism. Kamat Jyotsna scanning through different anti-brahminic and philosophical sources like Carvaka philosophy, Buddhism,, Jainism, Sikhism, and other forms of Naturalism, arrives at the following areas which could be paraphrased as Dalit eschatology.

God is non-existent: According to Carvaka, there is no God who is said to have created the universe. The universe came to be by natural phenomenon and it has been there from time immemorial. Hence there is no God who is the cause of the universe.

There is no pre-existence or after-life: Since there is no primal cause for the existing world and all that is in it, there is also no pre-existence of life and also there is no after-life. This two imply

that there is a primal cause or the prime mover of the universe. Since that has been rejected by the materialists, they also don't believe in the life before and life after.

There is no such thing as salvation (moksha); death itself is salvation: Life of individuals comes to an end once they die. Everything starts with this world and ends in this world itself. Hence there is no question of salvation or bondage. Everything happens right on this earth. As such, death is the cessation of all activities, animated or imagined. Everything stops with this world and with this life. There is no *moksha*/eternal bliss/heaven or *naraga*/eternal condemnation/hell.

Happiness is the main purpose of life: There is no purpose of living in this world other than living happily and meaningfully in this world. Meaningfulness (friendly, brotherly and leading just life) is the only happiness. And if that is present, there is no need for heaven or hell. Hence the human is called for to live a happy and meaningful life in this world and that is all.

The wise should seek happiness with productive work: Happiness comes through productive and meaningful life. Productivity is the art of living as it helps others also live in this world. People who are not productive but spend their time in chanting, officiating gods and goddesses have no real meaning to live in this world and they have no reason to live in this world. Hence the only reason and logic that we live in this world is for being useful to others. And this is possible only when one becomes productive and useful.

Pursuit of music, erotics, medicines etc., add comfort to life: We are called to live in this world not only meaningfully but also fully and happily. There are certain things like *music*, *erotics*, *medicines*, etc. offer good, happy and long life with a lot of enthusiasm to live and think fresh about every day. They bring a lot of enthusiasm, relaxation, and good will in and among the community members. Since the purpose of this life is to live happily and meaningfully, it is comfort and happiness that become the hallmark of human existence.

Distinction of class and caste are humbug: According to the materialists, caste and class are creation of small minded human beings. They have no place in the life of the people. In fact, there was no caste or class discrimination before the Aryans came. Hence it was not part of the Indian social structure and so they call it a big humbug. It is introduced to stratify the society.

The term "chastity for women" is rubbish : According to materialists, '*chastity for women*' was introduced by the patriarchal Aryan society upon the egalitarian Indian society gradually after their tent in Indian soil. According to the materialists who represented the people of the land, men and women are alike as far as chastity is concerned. It is introduced to subjugate women and gradually subjugate also the locals.

These are the important tenets of Indian materialists who ruled the country before and even after the Aryans invaded India. In summary, they were the rulers; they ruled people based on the higher principles like quality of class, gender and ethnic origin, fraternity, community living and respect for elders and love for the younger ones. Dependents in the society were not only protected but also very much respected. They organized their life based on the here and now and lived by the dictum of 'be happy and make others happy'.

2.5 EARTHLY ABODE OF GOD/GODDESS

But today, from the way philosophy, theology and other forms of epistemology and metaphysics, we cannot stick to only those anti-brahminic traditions. We have to take the life of Dalits as a whole from all religious and faith background and see what are the ideologies and principles that

arrange their way of life and give meaning. Hence based on the above discussions and their life situation in the modern world, we can adduce the following as the essence of Dalit eschatology.

Dalit eschatology places importance to community life and community harmony than religion or divine intervention in human life. The good and the bad are not based on the religious dictum but on community. Dalits learn good and bad of life at quite an early stage. Each one of these practices is discussed in terms of its morality and immorality. But this morality and immorality is not based on a divine order or divine edict. It is discussed in terms of the harmony of the families.

Dalits do not have the consciousness of the other world: the divine and the spiritual which is trans-sensory. They have materiality and temporality rooted in historical and spatial continuum. There is a big difference in the eschatology of Dalits who are very much of the world and the caste people who are against the world. Brahmin children are not taught to go to the field, or to look after the cattle or crops, but is supposed to go to school at an early age. Dalit children learn the ultimate meaning and purpose of life in the fields and life generating activities while Hindu children learn them in the books and papers to impose upon others and delink their life with ultimate principles.

The concept of God is introduced for Dalit children in the form of the moon, the sun and other natural objects which have close linkage with their life and livelihood. As children grow up, they also get acquainted with local deities and ancestral figures like Pochamma, Polimeramma, Kattamaisama, Kaatamaraju, Polaraju and other deities as Kancha Ilaiah would say. Among the Dalits, there is no concept of a temple in a definite place or form. Goddesses and Gods live in all forms and in all shapes and in different places. These gods and goddesses don't have permanent places like temples, but make shift arrangement under a tree or at the end of the village.

Though Dalits believe in the existence of 'spirit', the *atma* (soul), it is the dead people who come back to re-live in our own surroundings in the form of ghosts if they have not been fed well while they were alive; but there is no *swarga* (heaven) and there is no *naraga* (hell). All the dead live together somewhere in the skies. The Dalit spirit in its essence is not a Hindu spirit because the Hindu patriarchal Gods do not exist among the Dalits. Dalits are less religious unlike the Hindus. For them even hell and heaven do not exist. Every day, earning the food for that day is at the heart of their life struggle. A day without food is hell and a day with food is heaven for them

Dalits do not have intermediaries between them and their gods and goddesses like between the people and Pochamma; there is no priest. In fact, there is no need of a priest at all in the worship of Dalit Gods and goddess. Dalits relate to gods and goddesses for day-to-day needs and deliverance like small pox or fever. They don't pray for *swarga* which is unreal for them but pray for deliverance from fever and small pox, etc. which are real in their life. In Brahmin wadas and families, narratives about heroes and heroines do not exist within a human context. This is because Brahmin life is alienated from the kind of socio-economic environment in which a real hero or heroine can be constructed.... Brahminical culture recognizes negative heroes and heroines. For e.g., Krishna who encourages one to kill one's own relatives is a hero. Arjuna who killed his relatives is a hero. In the Dalit world, there is a number of real-life situations from which ideal heroes and heroines emerge. Also their heroes and heroines are not negative in life,

but who do positive things. For ex, Pochamma and Mariamma became heroines, Kattamaisamma became heroine and Beerappa became hero, Madurai veeran became hero because they saved life from diseases, from hunger and so on.

2.6 HEAVENLY BLISS ON EARTH

The difference between man and woman, boy and a girl which one finds in a caste Hindu family as very rigid is not present in Dalit homeland. In the Hindu family the sex and age are two determining factors and measuring rods of the status within the family which is very much absent in the Dalit family. Dalits don't perform any ceremony to initiate boys into religion which aims at making the Hindu twice born, one in this world and the other in the next world. They have only one birth, even according to Hindu texts. As a result no Dalit performs the 'upanayana'-wearing the sacred thread as a sign of becoming Hindu. Hence they don't have life after death, but only one life in this world. Dalits remain once-born. They are happy about it. For Dalits marriage is a worldly and human affair that performs the human functions of production and procreation. This is clear from a proverb that our people use very often. "Without the couple, how can there be a crop?" Power relations between men and women in Dalit families are not 'sacred' and therefore less manipulative. The divine stories do not structure them into an ideology that works on the human plane as male control over the female. To that extent there is a less complicated and less oppressive relationship between man and woman among the Dalits.

2.7 EVERY-DAYNESS AS RELIGIOUS RITUALS

Dalits are not used to reading the book, going to the temple, chanting prayers or doing the *sandhyavandana* (evening prayer). The Bhagavat Gita is said to be a Hindu religious text. But that book was not supposed to enter Dalit homes. Dalits don't have any religious text as their own and so have no boundaries either in accepting or rejecting gods and religions. Their gods and religions are very practical and convenient. Religious texts and sacred rituals are alien to Dalits. The stories of Rama and Krishna, poems from the Puranas, the names of the two epics called Ramayana and Mahabharata are not part of the religious world of Dalits. For them their fields, flock, sun, moon, darkness and light are more real and so more important than myths, legends and Puranas. Dalits rise from their beds and begin either to clear or cure the skins or prepare the leather for shoe-making. In the majority of cases, they then go to their master's fields to cut the crop or to bundle it up. In the rush of the day and in the midst of the scores of house and field works they do not have time to think about God or prayer. After that the women cook some sort of porridge or even rice with water, the food of the poor where even the one curry was as it is made in a Kurumaa or a Goudaa house does not exist. Hence they cook some liquid stuff to swallow. The woman must rush because they must reach the working point in the fields much before the dawn breaks. All Dalit men and women must do this. Their work never starts with a morning prayer or cold water bath. The *surya-vandana* (Morning Prayer) that the Hindu does never finds a place in their day's timetable. The very lifestyle does not provide the space for god, worship, morning and evening prayer, etc. For a Dalit woman cooking is a mundane activity, meant to feed the human body and keep it going. For a Hindu, God is center even in the kitchen. The notion of God and the notion of religion does not figure in the Dalit cooking. There is not the concept of *prasadam* (food offered to God) in the Dalit families.

2.8 PRODUCTIVE ESCHATOLOGY

In the Dalit communities, they have a philosophy in performing productive work which is distinctly different from the Hindu philosophy. It is a mundane, human philosophy. It does not belong to the 'other world' and 'other life', but deals with this world. Its everyday life belongs to the present *janma* (life). This philosophy is taught right from their childhood and it seeps into the making of life are expressed in one sentence which can be understood, not only by these communities but also by Brahmins and Banias. This is repeatedly expressed in our day today life as "unless the hand works the mouth cannot eat". Gita philosophy of life, "you have the right to work, but not to the fruits". It establishes an ideology which says that our masses, the Dalits must work, but they must not aspire to enjoy the fruits of the work. It is not detachment as it is often preached but deprivation and disparagement of the working class, the Dalits.

2.9 DEATH AND TRANSITION

The difference between the Hindu Brahminic death and Dalit death lies in the very concept of death itself. What is the Brahmin's notion of life and death? A Brahmin believes that life must be lived for the sake of death which will make him eternal. To live this way is to live a life that constantly thinks about death. Life in this universe must ensure a perennial life in the other world, that is, in heaven. The Gods that he/she propitiates, time and again are to provide two things. One, a happy life here on this earth, which in philosophical terms is a *kshanabhanguram* (a life that survives only a minute). At the same time, however, this short span on this earth must also be made to ensure a permanent life of privilege and pleasure. So, for a hindu, death is a transition from this *kshanabhanguram* to eternity. Death for a Dalit is end of everything. Hence he gives the best and most extravagant ceremony to bid goodbye to his/her beloved who departs this world. It is also a joyful occasion as death is the cessation of all pain from this world. Though the relatives will mourn the death, they know that all his/her pain and suffering stops with death and so feel happy and satisfied.

Today conversion to religion for a Dalit is a vehicle to social equality and mobility. They know that Brahmins and other Aryan communities climbed up in the social ladder using religion and religious philosophy as a vehicle. Hence today Dalits reject the religion which the Aryans used to subjugate them. Dalits reject that religion and feel free to convert to any other religion like Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism, etc. to climb up the social ladder. This again proves that they don't place much importance to religious teachings and its principles, but social dimension of religion as to which religion can socially and economically liberate them becomes their faith. Thus they don't find meaning which preaches life after death but does not ensure prosperity in this life. Hence they don't believe in the life after death. In Dalit philosophy of life, we find the absence of eschatological transition from life miserable here on earth to a blissful life after death.

We can boldly say that Dalit community is the only community in Indian context which keeps changing and ideologically growing while all other caste communities get frozen with some ideological trajectories. It is because this is the only community which has come out of the strict religious and ethical teachings that were imposed upon them. This is the community which basically feels that religion and moral codes and norms were basically to constrict the growth and realization of human potential in its full. While all other communities accepted them as good

to a great extent, it is Dalit community which critically looks at it and evaluates from existential point of view. That is the reason, it keeps on expanding its vision and mission ever more.

2.10 LET US SUM UP

Dalit eschatology in its original sense is an antithesis to eschatology itself. But it can be grouped under eschatology because, they do believe in certain principles which are life giving and ultimate in their life. Principles of equality, universal brotherhood and freedom of all irrespective of age, colour, sex, caste and other orientations are the dearly loved and cherished values in the Dalit community. These can be considered as Dalit eschatology which takes its inspiration not from the extra worldly life but very much in the here and now and which can bring meaning and happiness for all in the here and now. This is the core of Dalit eschatology.

2.11 KEY WORDS

Janma : life given to a living being

Swarga : Heavenly bliss

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UNIT 3 IMPACT OF WORLD RELIGIONS ON DALITS

Contents

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

3.1 INTRODUCTION

'Religion' which is known as 'dharma' in Indian context is an important concept rooted in human mind. It plays an important role in the life and growth of people. It has been one of the tools people have used as an agent of either bondage or liberation. Religion influences the cultural life of societies like its thoughts and actions, philosophy, myths, literature, other arts, rituals, festival and ceremonials. That means, if one inspects the cultural elements of anybody's personality, one would find various elements created by religion.

3.2 DALITS AND RELIGION

India has been the cradle of religions for millennia. Many religions saw Indian soil fertile and flourished here. Some like Hinduism, Christianity and Islam came from outside and others like Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism were born here. These are some of the world religions that are professed by the people of India. We shall discuss some of these world religions and how they have played a role in the life of the Dalits as a means to protest and also vehicle of social mobility. Religion works to establish peace, harmony and fraternity and make everybody as equal. But in actual situation, religion has been the source of tension, animosity, riot and war, bloodshed and loss of lives. Indian history is rampant with facts of violence and figures of deaths in the name of religion. So, religion has never been a neutral concept among its followers. It has affected Dalits more than anybody else as they share the lowest place even in the religious arena. This only played a crucial role in changing religious affiliation whenever there was a new religious movement introduced to the Dalits.

In India caste has been interwoven with religion which permeates in all aspects. Caste interpolates as cultural expression of Indian system with religious backing. Thus caste and religion are not just practices. They are two main pillars of Indian society which determine the social structure, status, hierarchy and functional roles of people. Historically, religion performed two functions. On the one hand it was used as an agency of social control and mechanism for social exclusion, and on the other, it brought social mobility. A careful study of India's social structure helps us understand the religious organization of Dalits. It can be described as 'a wheel within a wheel' where each caste is linked with social, religious and other responsibilities.

Dalits are by nature very religious and God fearing people but at the same time see religion as the embodiment of their social and cultural identity. Their sense of religious sentiment and pride go hand in hand as they believe that their religious inclination brings them self-dignity and self-respect. Historically they have often denounced religions which preach inequality and practice hierarchy like Hinduism. Before we embark upon the Dalit movement to other religions, we need to look into the salient elements of Dalit religion so as to know why they moved from one religion to another.

3.3 FEATURES OF DALIT RELIGION

It is quite clear from the existing surveys, research studies and writings that the Dalit religious tradition as a belief system is very different from that of mainstream Hinduism. Religious exclusion and marginal space within Hinduism pushed most of the Dalits to explore alternative religious identities. The untouchables were always in search of new religions at various historical junctures. Dalits look at religion as the extension of their identity, social dignity and self-respect.

Nature as the embodiment of God's revelation

Dalit religion discerns the divine in natural objects and the presence of supernatural in natural forces. Western writers, whose twin mission was to subjugate other cultures and to mutilate the Nature, had called this world-view as 'animism'. For dalits, beneath every object, whether a growing tree or a static stone, there is life supernatural. As symbol of this kinship of nature and the supernatural innate they have deified objects like stones and trees. In every hut or outside every dalit hamlet a stone or a tree had been dedicated as representation of the Deity. The worship of nature resulted itself in the preservation of the nature. Thus the dalit religion is eco-friendly.

Thin space between the Divine and the Human

God takes the closest place of the human as God(dess) also undergoes the passion and emotion of the human beings. The symbolism involved with food, thread and stick suggests they believed in God(dess) who can be hungry and thirsty, God(dess) who is industrious and God(dess) who is vulnerable. Another dimension of human quality they attributed to god is as god's blessings to every natural resources and abundance and god's wrath to every human and natural calamities. Often offerings were made to propitiate the Deity who withholds the rain. Even construction of canals and dams were shown as divine means to water the lands and provide livelihood to dalits during the famine.

Gender equality as the core of Dalit Religion

The rituals and ceremonies of the dalits mirror the space that women occupied in the society. Dalits had recognized the feminine dimension of the Deity and it is evident in the fact that in most cases Deity manifested Her (Him) self in the form of feminine. They worshipped Goddesses like Mariamma, Yellamma, Kaliamma, Morasamma and Matangi, Somalamma and Moosamma. There were also Gods in the dalit pantheon but they only played a secondary role. This clearly shows that Dalit society was basically matriarchal which gradually was converted to patriarchal at the invasion of the Aryans.

Protest is an intrinsic element of Dalit Religion

To a dalit, protest is lifestyle. There were several ceremonies that reflect the element of protest and some of them were incorporated into the Hindu culture. It had also been a custom among dalits to clean their streets with water mixed with turmeric whenever a Brahmin happens to pass by their hamlet. Though it was rare having a Brahmin pass through their hamlet, it was customary to purify the street from his polluting footsteps. It was a form of protest against Brahmins who did the same when dalits walked in the village.

3.4 DALITS AND RELIGIONS COMING FROM OUTSIDE

There are two religious streams in India which have their strong following. They are basically theistic and atheistic. Theistic religions are those which accept the authority of the Vedas (Vedic Brahmanism and Hinduism) and atheistic which do not accept the authority of the Vedas. But here, we would like to bring in two other streams: those religions which came here from outside and those religions which originated in Indian soil. We make this as the line of difference for this chapter.

Religions That Came From Outside: All those religions which came from outside the Indian sub-continent are usually known as foreign religions. They are, Vedic Brahmanism, Christianity, and Islam. Since they were not originally from the Indian soil, they had to adapt to Indian culture, customs and basic social relationships. They did it either by accommodation or by co-option.

Vedic Religion- Brahmanism

According to Indian social scientists like Kappen, it was Vedic religion, which provoked the first crisis of culture and religion in India. By Vedic religion he means the stage or religious consciousness represented by the Samhitas, the Brahmanas and the Upanishads, spanning a period of over 1500 years ending with the rise of Buddhism. During the Vedic period, the aborigines were denied the right to education and even the right to live. The caste system placed Dalit people at the bottom of the society with least wealth or power. They were the most oppressed and exploited lot, condemned to labor for freely or with a very little remuneration.

Fa Hien, a Chinese Buddhist pilgrim who recorded his visit to India in the early 4th century BCE., noted that Chandalas were segregated from the mainstream society as untouchables. Traditionally, they were considered to be beyond the pale of *varna* or caste system. They were originally considered as Panchama or the fifth group beyond the fourfold division of Indian people. They were not allowed to let their shadows fall upon a non-Dalit caste member and they were required to sweep the ground where they walked to remove the 'contamination' of their

footfalls. These are but a few to enumerate to show that they were subjected to innumerable hardships and obstacles to realize their human dignity. Both Vedic ritualism and the teaching of the supremacy of Brahman were bound to be called in question by the common people. The popular discontent found expression in dissident sects like Jainism (540-468 BC) and Buddhism (563-483 BC). There is no doubt that both Jainism and Buddhism were the first attack on the Brahminic religion and caste system.

In the second century B.C.E., the Brahmin Commander Pushyamitra Shunga had assassinated the last Maurya King Bahidhrata, and usurped the throne. After capturing political power, the people in Brahmin *varna*, created a tremendous havoc in the cultural life of India. On one hand, the system of Chaturvarna with Brahminic supremacy, and on the other, male dominated gender discrimination against women, were strengthened during this time. The Brahmins of Bhrigu race were on fore front in this. Manu-*smriti* which strictly implements above mentioned double social system was created by Brahmins of this Bhrigu *vamsha* during this period.

Reasons of denying Brahmanism

1. This religion is not created by us. It has not voluntarily sprung up from amongst us. We have not accepted it ourselves of our free will. It has been thrust upon us from outside.
2. We have no authority to frame its rules or to change them as need arises. We have no freedom to analyze it.
3. It does not think of our welfare or wellbeing. But it is tyrannical to us. It erodes away the feeling of humanity from within us.
4. It compels us to commemorate the moments of our defeats as our festivals and celebrations.
5. It impresses on our minds the “*sanskaras*” of self-indignity such that we should denounce our own forefathers and worship the immoral forefathers of Brahmins.
6. It distorts the History.
7. It does not believe that all people in our own religion are equal as human beings.
8. It deprives us from all proper opportunities of development.
9. It has tortured all those who have tried for our cultural freedom. And this tendency has not changed even now.
10. In this religion, there are no ‘*sanskaras*’ to give proper respect to women.

Islam

Islam is a religion of egalitarianism and brotherhood. After the defeat of Buddhism, it maintained these values in India for centuries. Not only did those who became Muslims benefit by escaping from caste restrictions, but Muslim rule also provided a social and political context for the growth of Bhakti movements. Within these, to a greater or less degree, Dalits and low castes sought a religious equality and expressed a devotionism which heralded a supreme deity not very different from Allah.

Dalits were caught in this process. They were defined, by the elite, as “Hindus” – though they had few rights within orthodox Hinduism, and were not allowed even into the temples of the Bhakti cults. Almost all elite nationalists, including Gandhi, argued that Dalits should not identify with an “alien” religion but instead seek to reform “their own” religion. Yet it was only by a strange, imposed definition that Dalits could be said to be part of the Vedic- identified Hinduism which had never given them religious or social rights.

During much of the colonial period also, Muslims and Dalits were allies. They had in common a fear – often hatred – of the dominant Brahmanism. As Ambedkar pointed out in his book *Thoughts on Pakistan*, between 1920 and 1937 it was Muslims, Dalits and Non-Brahmans who

had worked the reforms, holding office in provincial assemblies and working in alliance on issues involving constructing the nation – on programmes which included opening up water tanks, roads, schools to Untouchables. In areas such as Bengal, a strong political alliance was formed between the *Namasudra* (Dalit) movement and the Muslims, which gained strength because both were predominantly tenants fighting anti-landlord struggles. Dalits also embraced Islam attracted by its teaching of equality, compassion and justice as its hallmarks. But the reality was different as it was also influenced by the caste system. Thus Muslim society in India can also be separated into several caste-like groups. In contradiction to the teachings of Islam, descendants of indigenous lower-caste converts are discriminated against by "noble", or "ashraf", Muslims who can trace their descent to Arabian, Iranian or Central Asian ancestors. There are several groups in India working to emancipate them from upper-caste Muslim discrimination.

Christianity

Though Christianity originated in Asia, it is widely known and accepted as European religion and anybody following Christianity in India is termed as 'foreigner'. It is because Christianity brought a European face in terms of culture and civilization based on science. While Christian teachings like equality, brotherhood and compassion, social justice, etc. attracted Dalits more than any other religion, the dominant caste people were attracted by its educational facility, institutional capacity and other benefits. Christianity when introduced in India faced the same fate of allowing caste practice as part of Indian culture. The church placed more importance in the number of conversion and external liturgical practices like Sunday ceremony, ministering to sacraments than its social and ethical relation and impact upon its adherents. As a result, it allowed the caste practice creep into Christianity which has replicated Hindu social order among Christians.

Today there is no difference between a Christian whose religion does not believe in caste and a Hindu who believes and practices openly caste system. Both of them have the same mindset regarding the social hierarchy. Hence one can easily observe today that while most of the dominant caste and Shudra caste Christians clamour for power, prestige and wealth of and from the churches it is only Dalits who fight for the core teachings of the Gospel like equal treatment, sense of brotherhood and social justice. The recent tension in the churches in India is nothing but an assertion from the Christians of Dalit origin for equal treatment in the church and equal distribution of its wealth.

A 1992 study of Catholics in Tamilnadu found some Dalit Christians faced segregated churches, cemeteries, services and even processions. Despite Christian teachings these Dalits also faced economic and social hardships due to discrimination by dominant caste priests and nuns. Overwhelmingly, the mistreatment comes from the Hindu society - in the village, working place, from the landlord, at the village school, the village well, and the village shop. About 85% of Dalit Christians continue to live in the same segregated place, the same "*CHERI*" or COLONY or SLUM, even two or three generations after becoming Christians. A Dalit is not given the luxury of a new environment. A Dalit works in the same village, for the same wages, for the same masters, enduring the same tyranny and abuse, beatings and killings. His wife and daughter face the same molestation, rape and burning of huts and killing of children. Except for the records in the revenue offices which grossly violated of her/his Constitutional rights to enjoy the

benefits of reservation, he or she remains a Dalit in every sense of the word - ethnically, linearly, racially, socially, economically, culturally, vocationally, geographically, relationally, contextually and emotionally. The slaughter, rape or burnings of Veerambal (1955), Chundur (1993), Neerukonda Saukarankulam (G.O.1 402, July 76) Villupuram (11 Dec. 1980), Karamchedu (March 88), Kodiangulam (Oct. 95) and hundreds of other Dalit villages where almost all victims were Christian Dalits is irrefutable evidence to the fact of atrocity.

3.5 DALITS AND RELIGIONS ORIGINATED IN INDIA

There are religions which sprang up from Indian soil. One may call them indigenous religions. But there is specific context for the emergence of these indigenous religions. If one looks at the socio-political and cultural history of the emergence of religions in India, one will observe that they were all revolt religions except Hinduism. While other religions criticized the practice of caste system and untouchability propagated by Vedic Brahminism, it somehow assimilated most of the indigenous practices including their gods and goddess, but retained the hierarchical social structure based on caste system and rechristened it as Hinduism.

Jainism

Jainism prescribes a path of non-violence towards all living beings. Its philosophy and religious practice emphasize the necessity of self-effort to move the soul towards divine consciousness and liberation. Any soul that has conquered its own inner enemies and achieved the state of Supreme Being is called *Jina*, Victor or Conqueror. Jainism is also referred to as *Shraman* (self-reliant) Dharma or the religion of *Nirgantha* (who does not have attachments and aversions) by ancient texts. Jainism, which its followers consider to have always existed, is believed by historians to have arisen between the ninth and the sixth centuries BCE. Some have speculated that Jainism may have its roots in much earlier times, reflecting native spirituality from before the Indo-Aryan migration to India. In the modern world, it is a small but influential religious minority with as many as 4.2 million followers in India. and successful growing immigrant communities some Western countries.

Though it is one of the ancient religions of India, it has not been affected by the caste system for two reasons: its followers are very small, almost negligible in number when compared with other religions; and second, it is like Buddhism, a revolt religion against Vedic Brahmanism. It totally denounces caste system and the practice of untouchability. And today, it has very influential minorities and does not have any of its members as untouchables. However it is not very influential as a religious sect as Buddhism was and that is why it did not attract many people as its teachings were much more rigorous and prescriptive. Hence it is understandable that today's Dalits were not part of Jainism both for ideological and practical reasons.

Buddhism

Buddhism began in the 5th and 4th centuries BC, and it carried India through more than 1000 years of prosperity, and then gradually declined. Then in the 13th century, an Islamic government came to be in India, and Buddhism disappeared from most of the Indian Subcontinent, with pockets of Buddhist people living in the Himalayan mountainous and other

regions. The earliest known historical people to have rejected the caste system were Buddha and Mahavira. Their teachings eventually became to be known as Buddhism and Jainism which their followers converted into religions. Though they are today known as different religions, they were in fact against religion and denounced the existence of God and the belief in caste system. During the English Colonial Rule, even though it was a short moment in the history of India, there was a small resurgence of Buddhism in India. In the 1890's, for example, Dhammapala of Sri Lanka founded the Mahabodhi Society, and Iyothee Thass founded the Buddhist Society of South India, as well as other related Buddhist activities in Bengal and other places in India. The effects of these activities remained localized and never spread widely. In states like Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and few other regions, Dalits have come under the influence neo-buddhist movement initiated by Iyothee Thass and later promoted by Ambedkar.

In the 1950s, Ambedkar turned his attention to Buddhism and travelled to Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) to attend a convention of Buddhist scholars and monks. While dedicating a new Buddhist vihara near Pune, Ambedkar announced that he was writing a book on Buddhism, and that as soon as it was finished, he planned to make a formal conversion to Buddhism. In 1955, he founded the Bharatiya Bauddha Mahasabha, or the Buddhist Society of India. He completed his final work, "The Buddha and His Dhamma", in 1956. It was published posthumously. After meetings with the Sri Lankan Buddhist monk Hammalawa Saddhatissa, Ambedkar organized a formal public ceremony for himself and his supporters in Nagpur on October 14, 1956. Accepting the Three Refuges and Five Precepts from a Buddhist monk in the traditional manner, Ambedkar completed his own conversion. He then proceeded to convert an estimated 500,000 of his supporters who were gathered around him. Taking the 22 Vows, Ambedkar and his supporters explicitly condemned and rejected Hinduism and Hindu philosophy. According to Ambedkar Buddhism could be a universal religion because in the Buddha Sangh all are equal and there is no provision of different castes in Buddhism.

Hinduism

Hinduism is the offshoot of Vedic Brahmanism as it was becoming more and more untenable to the people of India and also it faced more and more criticism and opposition due to the domination of Brahmins and total subordination of the indigenous people like the Shudras and the Dalits of today. It was around this time that Lord Buddha initiated a radical critique of the contemporary religion and society. He was forthright in repudiating the caste system and the notion of purity associated with it. When Vedic Brahmanism realized that it could no longer survive in its present form it took a lot of indigenous customs and practices and rechristened into Hinduism. From out of the struggles between the Vedic religion and heterodox movements like Jainism and Buddhism was born what is today called Hinduism which reached its golden time during the Gupta period (300 – 700 AD). There are many factors responsible for it: Brahmanism succeeded in integrating within itself popular religions. Popular deities were absorbed into the Vedic pantheon through a process of identification or subordination. The Bhakti movements within Hinduism are the earliest known reformation during the medieval period. They encouraged the active participation and inclusion of Dalits. It became a socio-religious expression of the revolt of the masses originated in Tamilnadu but soon spread to Karnataka and Maharashtra, and eventually swept through the whole north India. It is undeniable that the Bhaktas represented the aspirations of the downtrodden masses as against the interest of the twice born. Saints of the bhakti Movement came from all castes, and the movement had a large support.

Unfortunately it could not maintain its initial thrust and was domesticated by Hindu orthodoxy. As Dumont observes, “a sect cannot survive in Indian soil if it denies caste”.

Sikhism

Although Sikhism clearly admonishes the idea of caste system, going to the lengths of providing common surnames to abolish caste identities, many families, especially the ones with immediate cultural ties to India, generally do not marry among different castes. Dalits form a class among Sikhs who stratify their society according to traditional casteism. Kanshi Ram himself was of Sikh background although converted because he found that Sikh society did not respect Dalits and so became a neo-Buddhist. The most recent controversy was at the Talhan village Gurudwara near Jalandhar where there was a dispute between Jat Sikhs and Ravidasa Sikhs. The different Sikh Dalits are Ravidasa Sikhs and Mazhabi Sikhs. There are sects such as the Adi-Dharmis who have now abandoned Sikh Temples and the 5 Ks. They are like the Ravidasis and regard Ravidas as their guru. They are also clean shaven as opposed to the mainstream Sikhs. Other Sikh groups include Jhiwars, Bazigars, Rai Sikh (many of whom are Ravidasis.) Just as with Hindu Dalits, there has been violence against Sikh Dalits.

3.6 DALIT CRITIQUE ON WORLD RELIGIONS

Dr Ambedkar, perhaps the most important leader next only to Buddha who lived in the fifth century BCE and the founder of Buddhism, an anti-caste movement and the philosophy of egalitarianism, was the *bête noir* of Hinduism because of its serious damage on the life of the Dalits; but he was very much in favor of religion. According to him religion is essential to society. He considers the foundations of religion as essential to life and the practices of society. It is a part of one's inheritance. He claims that what good thing he has in him or whatever have been the benefits in his education to society he owes to the religious feelings in him. At this he says, “I want religion, but I do not want hypocrisy in the name of religion.”

According to Ambedkar material comfort was by no means the solution of all human ills. Religion to him is the driving force for human activities. The man has a mind which needs food for thought and religion instills hope in man and drives him to activity. He was growing skeptical about the way Hinduism was practiced and the impact upon the society, especially the evil effects caste system and the practice of untouchability. Hence he started moving away from Hinduism much before he officially embraced Buddhism. Meanwhile, Dr Babasaheb had many options to choose while he was contemplating the renouncing of Hindu religion after he announced his firm decision in 1935. Very early in life, Dr Babasaheb had realized that if he has to bring his people to path of progress and up-lift their socio-economical status, the first and the most important step would be to come out of the shackles of Hindu religion.

Dr Ambedkar, after reading world philosophies and religions believed that neither bourgeois nationalism nor republicanism nor traditional Marxism provided any satisfactory solution to the problem of caste. Religion is not the appellation for such an unjust order. Religion must be judged by social standards, based on social ethics. He linked religion with the social well being of the people. To him, religion, social status and property are all sources of power and authority. He wanted to have a religion in the sense of spiritual principles, truly universal and applicable to all countries and to all races. He treated religion as a source of social and spiritual unity. But his

reason and his religious conviction were circumscribed by social environment, the decaying and degenerate condition of his fellow brethren.

Hence he turned to Buddhism. His long and arduous search for the emancipation is enshrined in his magnum opus: the Buddha and His Dhamma. He rejected Christianity and Islam because, though formally egalitarian religions, they did not face in their origin the task of fighting the caste system. The only religion, according to Ambedkar, which arose and grew out of the struggle against caste system and never succumbed to it, was Buddhism.

Characteristics of Religion according to Ambedkar: Religion in the sense of morality must, remain the governing principle in every society. Religion, if it is to function, must be in accordance with reason which is merely another name for science. Its moral code must recognize the fundamental tenets of liberty, equality and fraternity. Unless a religion recognizes these three fundamental principles of social life, religion will be doomed. Religion must not sanctify or ennoble poverty. He advocated that the centre of religion should not be between man and god but between man and man.

3.7 CASTE AND DALITS' RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

The conversion of Dalits to other religions does not really change their lives. Caste is like a shadow. It follows them wherever they go. They go through the same ordeal in their new religions what they experienced in their former religion, Hinduism. Though their conversion to other religions creates some ripples during the process, it does not alter the social and cultural map of the Dalits from the moment a dominant caste fellow also converts to this new religion. He/she carries this caste baggage and spreads upon the head of the Dalit and the Dalit is encircled by this caste cloak and finds very difficult to tear off and come out.

Caste cuts across barriers of Religions

So sadly and oppressively deep-rooted is caste in our country that it has cut across even the barriers of religions. The caste system has penetrated other religions and dissenting Hindu sects like Arya Samaj, and Brhmo Samaj to whom the practice of caste should be anathema. Today we find that Hindu dissentients and practitioners of other religious faiths are sometimes just as rigid in adherence to the system of caste as the conservative Hindus. We find Christian Dalit, Christian Nadars, Christian Reddys, Christian Kammas, and Mujbi Sikhs. Centuries-long caste oppression would not disappear by a mere change of religion. Even among the other religious groups in this country, the division of society between the dominant and subordinated castes is the only way of life. Almost all followers of the non-Hindu religions, apart from those of the Zoroastrians, are converts from the Hindu religion. Into the new religion they have carried with them their caste. It is hardly to be expected that the social prejudices and biases, the notions and feelings of superiority and inferiority, nurtured for centuries on end, would disappear by a mere change of religion.

Change of Religion has not changed the status of Dalits

Change of religion did not always succeed in eliminating castes. The converts carried with them their castes and occupations to the new religions. The result has been that even among Sikhs, Muslims and Christians, casteism prevails in varying degrees in practice, notwithstanding their

teachings of equality, fraternity and freedom and social justice. Casteism has thus been the bane of entire Indian society, the difference in its rigidity being of a degree varying from religion to religion.

3.8 LET US SUM UP

Dalits are the people who have more attracted towards world religions than anybody else in the society. One will find that Dalits are spread out in all religions that are followed in India. This only shows that they are the first ones to take the call of change; they are open to what is good, true and liberating to human society that divine world. They are the people who envision a caste free, gender unbiased and egalitarian society. Ambedkar also saw moments of liberation in Indian history. That was the way he saw Buddhism. He called Buddha his guru. He said that he didn't learn principles of democracy from Western philosophers but from his guru, Gautama Buddha.

"Positively, my social philosophy may be said to be enshrined in three words: liberty, equality and fraternity. Let no one, however, say that I have borrowed my philosophy from the French Revolution. I have not. My philosophy has roots in religion and not in political science. I have derived them from the teachings of my master, the Buddha". In his philosophy, liberty and equality had a place: but he added that unlimited liberty destroyed equality, and absolute equality leaves no room for liberty. In his philosophy, law had a place only as a safeguard against the breaches of liberty and equality; but he did not believe that law could be a guarantee for breaches of liberty or equality. He gave the highest place to fraternity as the only real safeguard against the denial of liberty or equality or fraternity which was another name for brotherhood or humanity. This was another name, according to Ambedkar, for religion.

3.9 KEY WORDS

Shamanism : Religions of Indigenous origin in India like Buddhism and Jainism

Brahmanism: Vedic religion which Dalit intellectuals regard as alien to Indian religions.

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UNIT 4 FUTURE OF DALIT RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this Unit are to provide a normative basis for a philosophy of Religion in order to reconstruct Dalit perspectives of Religious philosophy. The normative basis of a philosophy of religion would serve as the basis to engage any analysis of religion as to enable a Dalit perspectives religion. In this unit we shall attempt to give an understanding of what is meant by a philosophy of religion, problems that are usually dealt in a course on philosophy of religion with the aim of scrutinizing their relevance to Dalit reality and then proceed to evolve the rational basis for a religious philosophy of Dalits with a futuristic orientation.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Generally what is meant by 'Religion' is a fundamental set of beliefs and practices mostly agreed and followed upon by a group of people. These set of beliefs concern about the cause, nature, and purpose of the individual and the universe, and it involves devotional and ritual practices observances. Religions often contain moral norms that go to govern the individual and the society. Ever since the origin of human class, human demonstrated religious inclination and behaviour in terms of practicing certain types of faith in an invisible power and began to worship it in specific manners. The origins of religion is found in the form of diverse worship rituals to a supreme power or God the practice of which helped human to introduce certain social or cultural mores of social rules of conduct to keep himself/herself or his/her social group intact and appease the supreme god for protection. Religion is also understood as a cultural system establishing symbols that relate humanity to deeper truths and values. Many religions have narratives, symbols, traditions, cultural practices and sacred histories that are intended to give meaning to human life. Morality and preferred form of life are derived from religious ideas. Sometimes, the word 'religion' is interchangeable with particular faith or belief system. But religion differs from private belief and has a public aspect. Most religions in the world are expressed through organized group behaviours such as prayer, regard for priestly hierarchies, reverence for Holy Scriptures and places usually followed by a set of prescribed norms of

respective religions. Religious philosophy of the Dalit would begin with such a notion of religion as cultural system and religion as communitarian expression in the public sphere.

4.2 PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY

Religious philosophy or philosophy of religion according to most western philosophical traditions is but a rational attempt to justify the religious ideas of specific religious beliefs. From the Aristotelian and Scholastic tradition, it has been called as theodicy or natural theology. Since the medieval Christian tradition it has been regarded as an handmaid to theological claims about the nature of God and his role in human society. As an ancient discipline it was related to other branches of philosophy such as metaphysics, logic and history. It is frequently discussed mostly regarding the existence of God and the problem of evil. Generally, it is considered as a study of and a 'thinking about' religion. This discipline is usually carried out dispassionately by persons who self-describe as believers, those who may be called nonbelievers, and others who may treat or characterize their own belief or belief in general in specialized ways.

We make a subtle distinction between the usual philosophies of religion with that of religious philosophy. Philosophy of religion is concerned with questions regarding religion, including the nature and existence of God, the examination of religious experience, analysis of religious language and texts, and the relationship of religion and science. Religious philosophy in general is concerned about the rational scrutiny of religions as to evaluate its ideological, moral and structural (social & political) grounds for the promotion of a humane society based on the principle of an ethic of liberation with a view of responding against the religious, cultural and social facets of discrimination and dehumanization. While philosophy of religion may evolve as a justified belief, religious philosophy on the other hand is a rational investigation of the ethical demands of such a philosophy of religion. The philosophy of religion differs from religious philosophy in that it seeks to discuss questions regarding the nature of religion as a whole, rather than examining the problems brought forth by a particular belief system.

4.3 NATURAL THEOLOGY (THEODICY) AS A FAILED SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

As natural theology philosophy of religion was reduced only as an attempt to provide proofs or arguments for the existence of God. These attempts presumed an assumption that the existence of God can be justified or warranted on rational grounds. There has been considerable philosophical and theological debate about the kinds of proofs, justifications and arguments that are appropriate for this discourse. Ludwig Wittgenstein instead of grinding the traditional exercise for or against the proof of the existence of God, directly engages a linguistic-cultural (phenomenological) rendering of religion. For him religion, more than the traditional claim on the centrality of some sort of belief in God, is a "form of life" relevant to those who adhere to it. It is a sort of cultural linguistic game whose rules are better understood by those who participate in the specific forms of religious life. Phillips rejects "natural theology" and its evidentialist approach as confused, in favour of a grammatical approach which investigates the meaning of religious claims. Consequently, the question of whether God exists confuses the logical categories which govern theistic language with those that govern other forms of discourse (most notably, scientific discourse). According to Phillips, the question of whether or not God exists

cannot be "objectively" answered by philosophy because the categories of truth and falsity, which are necessary for asking the question, have no application in the religious contexts wherein religious belief has its sense and meaning. In other words, the question cannot be answered because it cannot be asked without entering into confusion. As Phillips sees things, the job of the philosopher is not to investigate the "rationality" of belief in God but to elucidate its meaning and by extension of its social meaning.

4.4 AMBEDKAR'S ANALYSIS OF RELIGION

Ambedkar's philosophical analysis of religion is an illustration of Dalit religious philosophy. His scrutiny of religion in general and of Hinduism in particular, in his classical work *Philosophy of Hinduism* is illustrative of Dalit Religious philosophy. He throws new light on critique of religious thought and point to a definite approach to the strengthening of Indian society based on the human values of equality, liberty and fraternity. Future of Dalit religious philosophy has such an analysis directed towards emancipation projects of the Dalits themselves.

He developed an indigenous analysis of religion to understand the nature of Hinduism and evaluate its social function, against the usual model of the Western 'theodicy-model.' His is a critique of religion for liberation. Dalit religious philosophy, in Ambedkar is a philosophy of emancipatory religion. Ambedkar points out that there are three important theses that form the subject matter of a philosophical analysis of religion both in natural and social theology. They are: '(1) The existence of God (2) God's Providential government of the universe and (3) God's moral government of mankind (society).' Ambedkar's analytical interest is to find out whether Hinduism as a religion and social order is an ideal scheme of divine governance whose aim is to make the social order a moral order. He observes that Hinduism has a written form constitution, *Manu Smriti* from which *scheme of divine governance* is easily deducible.

By his extensive analysis of religion, Ambedkar has the following significant notions. The Religion of the savage society is group or clan-centered. In it, there is no idea of a universal morality. The religion of the antique society had the idea of God but, it could only be at the level of national religion. The religion of the modern society has both the idea of a universal God and universal morality. Thus, there has been a transformation in the history of religion. There has been conceptual revolution in the truth-claims of religion. From group-identity, there was a change (revolution) to the idea of trans-group identity (national) and from the national identity, there emerged a revolution to the idea of God and morality to be universal and all-embracing of humanity and its social existence. There has been a revolution or ideological change regarding the notion of God. From no idea of god, to an idea of a god of this or that particular group's god or gods and from the group-gods to an idea of a national god and from the idea of a national god to the idea of a universal god. From the concept of a plurality of God, it changed to an idea of a singular God of human society. And such a god has been conceived to be creator, governor of morality. There has been a shift from the mere idea of fear of god to the idea of social existence based on morality. Ambedkar points out that revolution or conceptual change is the necessary prerequisite to the authenticity of religion. Thus, there has been a change or revolution in the concepts of morality as well as God in the history of religion.

As 'revolution' is the mother of philosophy and a lamp that illuminates philosophy, the best criterion to judge the philosophy of (any) religion is to study the Revolutions which religion has undergone. He says, "Progress in philosophy has come about by theoretical revolutions that has taken place in the history of philosophy." By revolution, he clarifies that it is meant to be both a conceptual or theoretical and social in nature. By social revolution he means alternative changes in structures of society towards an egalitarian social order. If any religion does not pass the test of 'such revolutions' both theoretical and social then, it tends to be not positivistic. He holds that a truth claim of a religion must necessarily pass through the test of reason. Revolution in the sense of theoretical and social has been the hallmark of religion in general. It has undergone changes from ancient to modern society. From the idea of natural gods to supernatural gods, and from the idea of supernatural gods to an idea of a single Creator –God and from the idea of a single creator-god to an idea of a moral God (who is the governor of morality in society) and from the idea of a moral-God to an idea of humanistic God. Thus, revolution is the way religion has progressed towards the modern society. It is an essential criterion for the authenticity of the truth claims of any religion.

Alongside revolution, the principles of social utility, justices and equality are spelt out by Ambedkar as verification criteria to judge the authenticity of a religion. In the antique society, utility was the criterion to judge right or wrong. The welfare of the tribe as a whole is considered the essential morality of the tribe. In addition, God must be useful in sustenance, and preservation and protection of tribe. The utility God is to protect the tribe not as individual but as society as a whole. Justice as a criterion is appropriate to the modern world in which the individual in the society is the end and the moral good of the society does justice to the individual. The norm or the criterion of judging the appropriateness of religion according to Ambedkar should not only be 'Godly' but also be earthly.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) What is your general understanding of religion?

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2) How is theodicy or natural theology different from Dalit Religious Philosophy?

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4.5 AMBEDKAR'S DALIT RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY

Ambedkar is not a denier of the need of religion. For him, religion is necessary; it is a social necessity to provide a moral unity. 'Religion is a social force ... religion stands for a scheme of divine governance. The scheme becomes an ideal for the society to follow. The norm of utility in religion would promote unity of society as a whole.' Ambedkar points out, "The Hindu is not prepared to face any inquiry" and he is not ready to change from his Vedic belief system. The Hindu way of life is deterministic; it is against the principle of any change or revolution or freedom. according to Ambedkar, the philosophy of Hinduism does not practice or even conceive the possibility of any revolution. In contrast to Hinduism, the very basis or the philosophical foundation of Buddhism lies on the acceptance of the reality of Change as the ultimate fact of reality.

Religion could function as an instrument of oppression or liberation depending upon its worldview and its social practices. If religion is based on the notion of revolution or change then it is liberative and if religion propagates infallibility and total surrender to its totalitarian perspective then, it would be oppressive. Religion needs to be dynamic for Ambedkar, because it is concerned with love of truth.

Concept of Justice is a compendious one and is the foundation of a moral order. Justice has always evoked the ideas of equality, of proportion of "compensation," Ambedkar conceives the principle of Justice as containing the notions of liberty, equality and fraternity. The principle of Justice according to Ambedkar is one of the essential criteria for an authenticity of a religion. Liberty, to be real, must be accompanied by certain social conditions such as social equality and economic security and equality of educational opportunities. Religion is to promote economic security and viability on an equal basis, to every member of the society. Fraternity is fellow feeling. It is empathy to identify oneself with the-other in the society. It is 'relationality' and against individualism. It is brotherhood. It helps to sustain the moral order in the society. It is a natural sentiment.

4.6 CRITIQUE OF SOCIO-RELIGIOUS INEQUALITY

For, Ambedkar, the theory of pollution is not originally untouchability, those who shared the caste-world-view, in order to resist those who did not share such ideology, introduced the concept of 'out-caste' whose original meaning is not untouchability but it is meant that there is separate group which does not share or which resists the idea of casteism. Ambedkar notes that the Buddhists are one such group of people who do not share the caste-ideology and who were the first to oppose caste and any other forms of segregation. He observes that the institution of caste is composed of certain universal Hindu ideas. These include the Hindu pollution concept such as the social units of *Jatis* (endogamous large-scale descent-groups), the cognitive categories of *Varnas* (ranked classification of *jatis*); the associated concepts of caste *dharma* (*varunashramdharma*) (religiously sanctioned duties of for the caste members) and sub-caste division of labour" all contribute to the practice of the division of human beings as pure versus impure. Such a position can neither be spiritual nor human.

Ambedkar establishes the conclusion that the philosophy of Hinduism does not promote nor contain the social value of justice. He points out that the moral order grounded in the Vedic world view is not-moral because it promotes a society of graded inequality, value hierarchy and value-dualism and exclusivism of the-social-other. He says, *Manu*, the author of Vedas, is a 'staunch believer in social inequality, and he knew that the danger of admitting religious equality. Ambedkar observes that the theory of the origin of the different caste groups, namely the theory of *Purushasukta*, uphold inequality. The metaphor of the *Purushasukta*, is a theory of the origin of the Universe. Its cosmogony interpretation of the emergence of the social system is strongly opposed by Ambedkar. He also questions the theory of the divine sanction for the establishment of the so-called '*sacred institution*'. Attempt to provide a divine sanction to caste-stratification by the author of the Vedas, is deliberate attempt to deify the social practice and by deifying caste-stratification it is meant to promote a collective consciousness that casteism is moral. Thus, Hinduism has paved a way for permanent system graded inequality that alienates every individual with the-other. It paves way for the practice of excluding the-other, which is opposed to social unity. The Vedas upheld a theory of occupational-determinism, according to which, the *Shudras* are to remain ever-slaves. Therefore, the philosophy of Hinduism cannot be said to promote of the principle of equality.

Caste is more than the mere division of labour. It is a division of labourers. It determines one's occupation according to the pre-determined theory of caste-birth. Caste prevents social mobilization. It creates contempt of labour and labourers. It is a division of labour accompanied by the division of labourers." Like its social and religious counterparts, the economic base of the caste system was not merely an ideal. The ideal was put in to practice and was, therefore, real. Caste miserably fails to be able to sustain every individual as a fraternal member of the society. Hinduism does not recognize liberty. Liberty, to be real, must be accompanied by certain social conditions such as social equality and economic security and equality of educational opportunities. It practices a philosophy of power relations wherein the poor and the weak are progressively silenced and negated. Hinduism does not also recognize fraternity is the opinion of Ambedkar. Hinduism is individualistic and not socially-oriented. It does not promote fellow feeling. Ambedkar observes, "Illiteracy became an inherent part of Hinduism by a process which is integral to it, it denied education to the people, namely the so-called untouchables. The notion of "education for masses" is absent in the philosophy of Hinduism. Thus, it has paved the way for 'secrecy of knowledge, monopoly of knowledge, and as a result, monopoly of societal power, at the expense denying the right of the suffering-other and sanctioning their denial as divine-based. The fact that Hindu social order, namely caste-system 'denies freedom of vocation' and it 'pre-ordains' it, according to one's caste category, proves that it does not promote liberty. In giving the critique of Hindu religion, Ambedkar envisages Dalit religious philosophy as realizing the ideal of liberty, social equality, economic security and education for all.

4.7 CHARACTERISTICS OF DALIT RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY

1. For a Dalit religious philosophy, hair splitting self-imposed arguments in defence of God or to provide sufficient reasons to justify the problem of evil on the pre-conceived idea that God is All-Good is not the primary crucial concern since these are ontologically pre-construed notions that side-line or misdirect social involvement and ethical regard/scrutiny of religion.

2. Dalit religious philosophy is not the philosophy of religion in the sense of dealing with nature, existence and the problem of defining God in particular ontological or metaphysical categories or an attempt to provide elaborate defence or offense of positioning God. It is to evolve a religious philosophy based on two principles of rationality and morality (ethic of liberation) as to check the validity of religious foundations and practices to promote a humane society based on justice and equality.

3. Dalit religious philosophy examines and critiques the epistemological, logical, aesthetic and ethical foundations inherent in the claims of various religions and check its sustainability to advance a society based on justice and equality. Whereas a traditional philosophy of religion or theology could elaborate metaphysically on the nature of God either rationally or experientially, a Dalit philosophy of religion is more interested in asking what may be ethically social and socially ethical without claiming any justified supremacy of one religious idea over or against the other.

4. Its chief aim is to evolve philosophy of religion, regardless of specific religious claims, the rational ground that provide a moral standard for harmonious social living. Dalit engagement of religion or Dalit religious philosophy intends to elucidate a content analysis of religions in terms of its authenticity to sustain the Dalit people as against the vulnerabilities of casteism.

5. From the point of view of Dalit religious philosophy or Dalit philosophy of religion, the traditional problems of natural theology is a failed social philosophy because it does not amount to involve the social content of religion rather it purports to reinforce dogmatic tenets of particular religious claims in an ontologically preconditioned manner.

6. Since religion covers a vast range of human actions, attitudes, perspectives, relations, codes of conduct, group behaviours, etc it is very difficult to define religion too narrowly as some do. Neglecting its multidimensional nature of religion, many provide a constricted understanding of their religions in exclusive categories. For them it is as theology, as only faith in God defined in certain conceptual categories, and as a specified set of belief systems and practices. Understanding the question of Dalit Religion or Dalit religious philosophy should therefore, include a variety of aspects such the cultural, the social, philosophical, anthropological categories. Dalit sense of religion is all-inclusive of these aspects and hence complex in treatment and understanding. There could be no single definition either of religion *per se* or Dalit religion in particular, that will suffice as to include the varied set of traditions, cultural practices and ideas that comprise it.

7. Dalits are culturally religious people. They absorb a variety of religious beliefs and practices such as; belief in supernatural powers, belief in the worship of Nature, Natural Objects, in utterance of prayers for strengthening of their livelihood and prosperity. They believe in spirits and spirits of their ancestors. They have faith in many or one God and believe in personal or impersonal God, in a God who is deemed a Creator and Protector against assaults and dangers, etc. There is belief and worship in a deity or deities, belief in pious devotional practices like offerings (mostly the fruit of the first harvest) to Gods/Deities. They visit to holy places or

pilgrim centres irrespective of any particular religion and undertake strict religious vows and observances. They believe in and follow certain social cum moral code of conduct.

8. Dalits are foundationally religious people however they may vary in their specific systems of beliefs or worships or religious observances or social mores for reasons that the term Dalit includes a variety of people with a complexity of social practices with diverse linguistic traditions. The only unifying facet is that the term Dalit refers to all those who are treated subhuman, as those who suffer the yoke of untouchability burdened by inhuman social religious and cultural caste system.

9. The belief in God is defined as theism where as the belief in no-God is atheism. Thus both theism and atheism are treated as exclusively opposed categories. Such an oppositional classification falls outside the purview of Dalit Religious philosophy because Dalits as historically and culturally religious people do not fall within the rigid prism of opposition either as believer or as unbeliever. Both the believer and the nonbeliever form the Dalit religious whole and demarcation in no way relevant in grouping the Dalits Religious philosophy as theistic or as atheistic. For instance the Dalits of Buddhist origin and/or conversion do not exercise belief in any theo-logical God, but still very much religious people.

10. There are varieties of theism such as, monotheism (belief in One God), polytheism (belief in many Gods), Deism (belief in a personal and transcendental God), henotheism (belief in one God without negating other gods), pantheism (Universe is God), pan-en-theism (God is part of nature) etc. To narrowly define Dalit religion in terms of any one of the varieties of theism is the rich complexity of Dalit religions. Within Dalit religiosity we may find diverse theistic trends but it is less likely to be a truism to define Dalit religion as forming a singular pattern of theism. Much more, one is bound to appreciate the cultural ground of Dalits as religious people instead of crudely classifying them in either camp of theism or atheism or its varieties.

4.8 FUTURE OF DALIT RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY

- Dalit Religious philosophy points towards a critique of religion which is based and regulated on certain rational, practical and moral principles.
- The purpose of Dalit religious philosophical engagement is emancipation or liberation of the suffering people under the burden of casteism. Hence which ever religion, be it Hinduism, Christianity or Islam if such religion imbibe caste cultural discriminatory practices, Dalit religious philosophy pronounces a methodological doubt regarding their religious claims and social content.
- The practical principle of Dalit Religious philosophy is to verify authentic sensibilities of religion in the sense that it should be guided by the principle of both conceptual and structural revolution. The revolution is classifiable into external and internal elements.
- An authentic religion should take into account progressive secularization of its foundations, in the sense that it should be relevant to the changing times and needs of human society.
- The metaphysical foundation of a true religion is constitutive of the metaphysics of change.

- An authentic religion must be grounded on the principles of justice and utility. It should be regulated by the practice of liberty, equality and fraternity.
- For Dalits Religion is of greater importance and cultural necessity. It could contribute social unity, provided it is based on the principles of revolution and social Justice. Since the philosophy of Hinduism can not be said to have founded on these principles, to consider it as a religion of societal liberation is not possible. The philosophy of Hinduism, as found in its scriptural tradition is not constitutive of the principles of revolution, justice and social utility. Given to its Caste-world view, and the social practice of Casteism, its philosophical ground is oppressive and therefore, cannot have the conceptual strength of promoting liberation of the socially weaker sections.
- Hence there arises the need for a religion that is based on the principles of social liberation that restores dignity, and affirms the life of the suffering-other in the society.
- A critique of religion in the Indian context presupposes a critique of Casteism in its social order. An authentic religion and religious is a critique of Casteism in favor of those who have been historically conditioned to the phenomenology of thrown-ness. That is to say it has to promote social justice as its ethical basis.
- A philosophical critique of religion should necessarily be a practical critique of discrimination in the society. And a critique of discrimination aims at the promotion of praxis of liberation. In brief, an authentic critique of religion and its social order addresses the problems of human society based on a philosophy of societal liberation.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) Elucidate the problem of Dalits as viewed by Ambedkar in Hindu social order.

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2) Examine the criterion for a Dalit Religious Philosophy.

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3) Evaluate the authenticity of any other religion other than Hinduism based on the principles of Dalit Religious Philosophy.

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4) Can we categorise Dalits' religious belief in God in any or many forms of theism? Substantiate your answer.

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4.9 LET US SUM UP

In short, Dalit religious philosophy is not pertaining to the type of religious beliefs or the problems of existence of God or Evil. It is a philosophy to promote a social form of life based on ethic of emancipation. The test of ethical and social content as criterion for authenticity: A true religion for Ambedkar should have both ethical content and social content. Critique according to him, therefore includes both theory and practice. Ambedkar's critique of Hinduism is grounded in the discourse between a philosophy of oppression and a philosophy of liberation. It is the negation of the negations structured in an oppressive social system. There is nothing material or social in it. Ambedkar's denial of casteism and thereby his denial of Hinduism is a deliberate ethical move away from the institutional interests of casteism in favour of social communicative interests, grounded in the principle that liberty of all is primarily liberty of the particular in the social. Hence for a Dalit religious philosophy, humans are not isolated individuals devoid of any relations. The human has its existence only in relation to others. We are social in the global sense and hence we are interchangeably social. Whatever may be our society in the present age, we belong to the whole human society in a holistic sense. It is both process of reflection of an alternative philosophy and a social action for liberation.

4.10 KEY WORDS

Dalit – *Purusartha* – moral governance – social utility – revolution – justice – equality – liberation – discrimination – subjugation – scriptural basis – purity and pollution – ethics – Authenticity.

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